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Contact: CDC, Division of Media Relations
(404) 639-3286

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Press Release

CDC to brief Congress on 50 years of disease investigations by the Epidemic Intelligence Service

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced today that it will brief Congress on 50 years of disease investigations by its Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS), a two-year training program that prepares disease detectives to work on the frontlines of the greatest threats to human health. EIS officers – more popularly known as disease detectives – have made headlines for their investigations of epidemics including *E. coli*, hantavirus and West Nile virus. They've also been portrayed in Hollywood movies such as "Outbreak" and "And the Band Played On."

The briefing will be held 2 p.m.-3 p.m. Wednesday, July 25th, in the Capitol Building, Room EF 100 on the East Front side of the Capitol.

CDC officials who will brief Congress include:

- CDC director Dr. Jeffrey P. Koplan, MD, MPH, who began his career with the CDC as an EIS officer in 1972, assigned to help eradicate smallpox in Bangladesh.
- Dr. Stephen Thacker, CDC's chief epidemiologist who oversees the EIS program, and who was an EIS officer in 1976, when he investigated the first outbreak of Legionnaires disease, then an unknown illness.
- Dr. Pratima Raghunathan, a current EIS officer who has investigated meningitis outbreaks this year in Ohio, where two high school students died, and in Benin, Africa, where at least 350 people died. This year in sub-Saharan Africa, meningitis epidemics afflicted 36,000 people, a situation that was made worse by a vaccine shortage. About 3,600 people died, many of them children and young adults.
- Dr. Rachel Avchen, a current EIS officer who is assigned to investigate developmental disabilities in children. She is studying kernicterus in infants, a type of brain damage that is preventable and caused by severe and untreated jaundice. She has found that infants with severe jaundice are not being treated promptly, resulting in brain



**Div. of Media
Relations**

1600 Clifton
Road
MS D-14
Atlanta, GA
30333
(404) 639-3286
Fax (404) 639-
7394

damage. Kernicterus can be easily prevented by placing jaundiced babies under a special lamp.

The EIS was established in 1951 following the start of the Korean War as an early-warning system against biological warfare and man-made epidemics. The program, comprising medical doctors, researchers and scientists who serve in two-year assignments, today has evolved into a surveillance and response unit for all types of epidemics, including chronic disease and injuries.

"The brave, dedicated public health officers who comprise the EIS have been on the front lines of the most challenging health threats to our nation and to the world," said CDC Director Dr. Jeffrey P. Koplan. "People are healthier and safer because of their sacrifices and accomplishments in controlling and preventing disease."

Over the past 50 years, EIS officers have played pivotal roles in combating the root causes of major epidemics. The EIS played a key role in the global eradication of smallpox by sending officers to the farthest reaches of the world; restored public confidence in the first polio vaccine after a defective vaccine led to panic; and discovered how the AIDS virus was transmitted. More recently, EIS officers have documented the obesity epidemic in the U.S., helped states to reduce tobacco use and have studied whether disease outbreaks were a result of bioterrorism. Many of the nation's medical and public health leaders, including CDC directors and deans of the country's top schools of public health, are EIS alumni.

Current CDC Director Koplan joined the EIS in 1972. His assignment took him to Bangladesh, one of the last outposts of smallpox infection, and, along with other EIS colleagues, helped eradicate smallpox from the world.

The Role of EIS

Originally, EIS officers selected for two-year field assignments were primarily medical doctors and other health professionals, such as sanitarians, dentists and veterinarians. Their focus was infectious disease outbreaks. Today, the EIS welcomes public health professionals, including post-doctoral scientists in statistics, epidemiology, microbiology, anthropology, sociology and the behavioral sciences. The scope of work has also evolved to address all preventable health threats: chronic disease, environmental hazards, injuries, violence, and workplace health and safety.

Currently, 60 to 80 people are selected annually for coveted EIS posts. Since 1951, nearly 2,500 EIS officers have responded to requests for epidemiological assistance within the United States and throughout the world. Each year, EIS officers are involved in several hundred investigations of disease and injury problems. Their research enables CDC and

its public health partners to make recommendations to improve the public's health and safety.

EIS officers are increasingly diverse and global in their focus. In 2001, about 60 percent are women and 25-30 percent are minorities. Today's officers also are equipped with more sophisticated tools and training, and they use laptops and the Internet to stay connected, according to Dr. Stephen Thacker, CDC's chief epidemiologist, who will also speak at the briefing.

"EIS officers receive more sophisticated training in epidemiological and statistical methods, as well as exposure to economics and the behavioral and social sciences. CDC's move into chronic disease, injury and environmental health makes these tools very essential," noted Thacker, who foresees a greater globalization of the EIS in the future.

As a new era begins, CDC Director Koplan sees EIS officers continuing to tackle public health challenges in new ways, while being a formidable force on the front lines of disease prevention and surveillance.

"EIS officers of the new millennium will face some of the old as well as totally new public health challenges – new infectious diseases, health disparities among different population groups, the toll of violence in society, and how to encourage healthy behaviors so that people not only live longer lives but healthier lives," said Koplan. "It is CDC's job to provide these disease detectives with the training and the tools to protect people's health and safety."

To learn more about the EIS, visit the CDC online at www.cdc.gov/eis.

About the CDC

CDC protects people's health and safety by preventing and controlling diseases and injuries; enhances health decisions by providing credible information on critical health issues; and promotes healthy living through strong partnerships with local, national and international organizations.

Note to Reporters: To attend the briefing, please call CDC's press office. CDC can also arrange for interviews with current and former EIS officers, as well as provide photos. Call (404) 639-3286 for more information.

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